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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an assignment originally designed for a course in family communication now being taught at the upper undergraduate level at a state university in the southwestern United States. The shrine, the project/assignment described in the paper, combines locally relevant cultural traditions which are broadly applicable with course concepts such as defining families; family stories and meaning making; family themes; rituals and traditions; family rules and roles, and so forth. While the text used is Turner and West's (1998) "Perspectives on Family Communication," the paper's assignment could be adapted to courses using a variety of other texts. In the course an (inter)cultural approach is taken, relevant to both the instructor's academic preparation and the multicultural teaching environment. The paper argues for the use of creative projects in communication courses and follows with a brief discussion of shrines/altars as creative and family traditions. It then discusses the assignment, giving three examples that illustrate both the academic and personal value of the assignment for students. (NKA)

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A revised version of this article has been accepted for publication and will appear in an upcoming edition of Communication Teacher.

CS 510 488

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The assignment described in this essay was originally designed for the course in Family Communication that I teach at the upper-class undergraduate level at a state university in the Southwestern U.S. The shrine combines locally-relevant cultural traditions which are broadly applicable, with course concepts such as defining families; family stories and meaning making; family themes, rituals and traditions; family rules and roles, and so forth. While I use Turner and West's (1998), *Perspectives on Family Communication*, this assignment could be adapted to courses using a variety of other texts. I take an (inter)cultural approach to the course, which is relevant to both my academic preparation and the multicultural environment where I teach. In this essay, I briefly argue for the use of creative projects in communication courses, followed by a brief discussion of shrines/altars as creative and family traditions. Then I describe the assignment giving three examples that illustrate the value of the assignment for students both academically and personally.

All cultures use the power of creativity as a means of personal expression and cultural identification (Sorrells, 1999, is a cogent argument for examining creativity *as* communication). Artistic and creative expression shape and reveal the diversity and complexities of human experience and interaction (Sauceda, 1997). In order to understand a culture, we study the symbols of representation used therein. As a central cultural institution, both constituting and constituent of the larger culture, families are

created and maintained through complex symbolic actions, interactions, and representations. It is through creative expression that we individually and collectively construct symbolic representation and meaning Sorrells, 1999). Creativity is a profound means through which we both learn and perpetuate our family structures—and indeed our cultures. Yet in conventional university instruction, we rely primarily on linear and verbal modes of expression as ways to communicate information and assess student learning. The family shrine or altar is an assignment designed to tap the creative spirit in all of us, to engage students in non-linear, creative ways of knowing about families and family communication. The assignment described below combines creative expression with both oral and written reflections on course content and the creative process, offering instructors a multifaceted basis from which to assess student learning.

Based loosely on the traditions of many cultures and religions (e.g., Southwestern U.S., Latin American/Mexican-Catholic, Celtic-Pagan, Indigenous cultures of the Americas, New Age, etc.), a shrine is "an ordered arrangement of objects with symbolic meaning" (McMann, 1998, p. 9). While we often think of a shrine or altar as having particular religious significance and perhaps even formal rules, many people make informal shrines—in both reverent and whimsical ways—to represent a loved one, or as a place to seek comfort and guidance. Material things can be displayed in a purposeful and meaningful way to evoke memory, respect, and inspiration. Typical objects include candles, stones, photographs, flowers, letters, locks of hair, and other small objects of personal and relational significance. It should not be surprising that, if asked to describe a personal shrine or altar, people begin by telling the stories of each object and of their relationship to the person, people, and/or themes it represents (McMann, 1998; Sorrells,

1999). This practice of shrine-making—though not always called such—is actually very common. Carefully arranged objects on the top of a dresser, photos on the mantle, or even the refrigerator door are versions of shrines.

In this assignment, students create a shrine/altar to their family or particular member(s)/aspect(s) of their family, using objects such as photographs and mementos. Students may focus on any or all members, dead or alive, using any medium they choose (e.g., collage, sculpture, array, etc.). The shrine should depict family structures, values, traditions, narratives, and other family themes, based on course readings up to this point in the semester. Students exhibit shrines/altars in class accompanied by a 5-minute oral presentation; they may choose what to disclose/explain in the presentation. They then write 3-5 page essays reflecting on their project and what they learned about course concepts and their own families in the creative process. Evaluation for each aspect of the assignment can vary depending on course objectives. In my course, the shrine itself is worth 10%, another 10% for the paper, and the presentation is ungraded. In my evaluation of the shrines I consider the clarity and significance of symbolic representation (according to student explanation), the inclusion of a variety of relevant concepts from the readings, and the effort demonstrated in the construction of the shrine. The ability to assess the aesthetic value of the shrine or altar is not necessary, and students should be reassured that so-called "artistic ability" is not required to do well on the assignment. Most of the evaluation is based on student representations of course concepts as related to their own families in the shrine, as well as mastery of the concepts themselves as discussed in the paper. As the following three examples indicate, students interpret the assignment according to their own needs and choose a variety of creative media.

One student, a self-identified lesbian, decided to depict her "family of choice," a common notion of family negotiated in gay and lesbian culture where youth may be formally or informally ousted from their families of origin. She used a 9" x 12" plastic picture frame filled with a collage of photos and embellished with rainbow ribbons and other symbols of lesbian and gay culture. Her presentation included the culturally-appropriate (re)definition of the term "family," the ways families of choice adopt traditional family roles, rules, traditions and rituals, some of the common themes of her chosen family, and also the story of one "sister's" suicide after being rejected by her birth family. This student reported the renewal of her "family's" willingness to process the death of a member because the shrine-making process precipitated renewed contacts and conversations. Further, the oral presentation created a very important learning opportunity for the class, providing a real-life illustration of the textbook discussion of gay/lesbian families, and encouraging tolerance for diversity.

Another student used a set of antique printer's drawers (shallow wood boxes with a series of small compartments for the metal letters used in old printing presses) to create a sort of "shadow box" for her son. Her grandfather had worked in printing as a family business, so she provided a family story as background replete with family themes of hard work and perseverance. She filled the compartments with small objects, toys, photos, and mementos from her pregnancy to the present (her son was 8 at the time). She collaborated with her son, who made his own choices for some of the items to be included, and she left about half of it empty to represent his future. She reported that making the shrine was an opportunity to share family stories with her son, as well as to

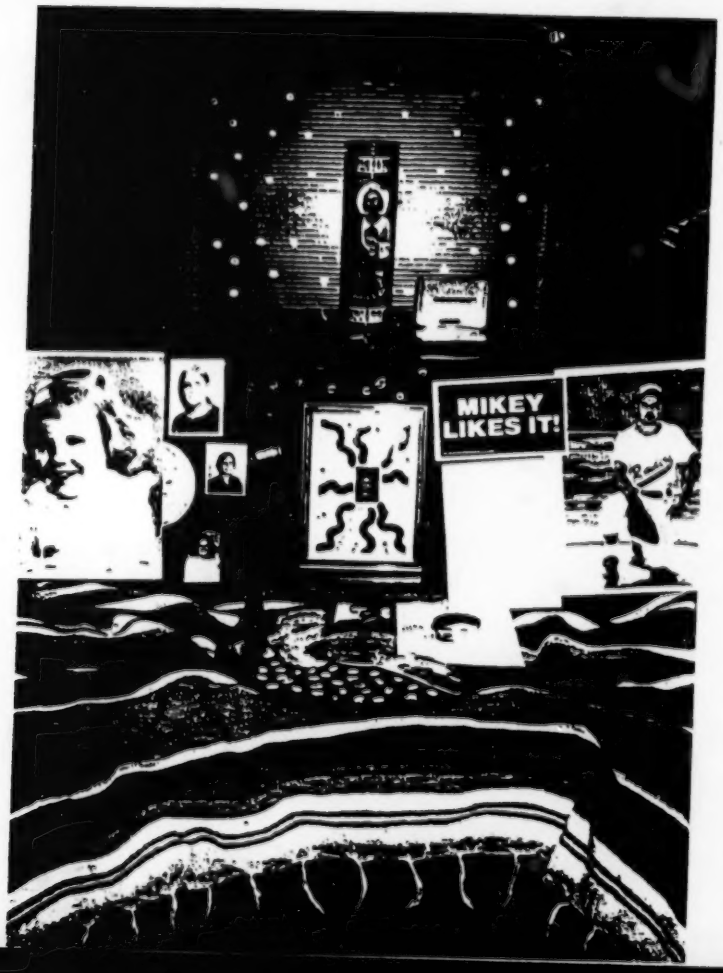
teach him the value of preserving family memories. The "shrine" is now in his room as his ongoing project.

One student athlete was initially indifferent to the assignment and was living far from home with little access to family mementos, which tend to pass from woman to woman in his family. This student struggled with the creative aspects of the assignment, but ultimately made a collage from magazine clippings depicting his mother's strength in his single-parent family. He was very satisfied with his collage and the ways it helped him understand some of the course concepts, such as family themes and rituals. In his presentation, he told the story of sharing the collage with his mother during a recent visit, which created a rare opportunity for him to verbalize his appreciation of her. From these examples, it is clear that shrines or altars do not have to be based in any particular institutional religious practices, nor must they necessarily focus on the morbid. Shrines can be interpreted and constructed in a myriad of ways by individual students.

I strongly recommend instructor participation in this assignment, and I took the opportunity to construct a shrine to my grandmothers that I shared with the class. Instructor participation helps create a dynamic of mutuality and collaboration that can help break down barriers in the classroom such as traditional power relationships and one-way knowledge dissemination. Another benefit of instructor participation is modeling appropriate levels of self-disclosure, a particularly poignant issue in family communication courses.

For many students, this was a unique creative/learning experience. Most reported that it was a useful learning tool as well as being personally meaningful; for example, it presented opportunities for family relationship building and reconnection to a sense of

family. This or similar creative assignments could also be adapted to courses in interpersonal communication as a way to think about relationships, or for exploring cultural identity in intercultural communication courses. The shrine/altar is one way of bringing creativity to the university learning environment, and certainly has proven valuable as a medium for learning about family communication.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